

Feminist Discussion of the Ramayana

Meenu Aryaa¹, Kusum Kundu², Simpi³

Assistant Professors (English), S.D. Mahila Mahavidyalya, Narwana

Abstract

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are two of India's greatest epics that have influenced the Hindu way of thinking and belief system. The two epics are believed to be partially based on historical events and are considered "itihasa" in Sanskrit, which means historical texts.

The Ramayana is an epic story that provides many insights into the values of ideology, duty, relationship and karma. It is known to be part of the sacred literature for the Hindus not only because it speaks of the meaning of life, but it also provides a spiritual meaning and wisdom. Andrew Long, a Scottish poet, novelist, and literary critic, says that "The epics are not only poetry but history, history not of real events, indeed, but of real manners, of a real world, to us otherwise unknown."

The Ramayana and its numerous adaptations tell us the same story of Ram and Sita, but except for my state of mind and my spectacles, what is it that changes on every new reading? I'm not talking about the actual frame and pieces of lens, but the feminist lens. A feminist is 'a person who supports the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men'. But these post-mid-19th century noun insertions and their parameters are increasingly getting used for modern reimagination of leading lady characters in the Ramayana, like Kaikeyi, Sita, Tara, Surpanakha, or Mandodari. How inspiring are these women as reclaimed icons for contemporary feminism? Can their societies and male counterparts be termed feminists-in-retrospect?

Keywords: Epic, Itihasa, Historical, Literary, Feminism, Ramayana.

Introduction

"There can be no better textbook of morals (than Valmiki's Ramayana) that can be safely placed in the hands of youth to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character," said Srinivasan Iyengar. In line with this observation, Rama, the hero of the epic, is perceived not only as the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons but also as the ideal husband and king, while Sita, the heroine, is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word, and deed.

The Ramayana is a classic epic story narrated in Sanskrit language by Valmiki. It revolves around the life of "Maryada Purshottam" Ram, who was exiled to live as an ascetic in the forest for 14 years along with his wife, Sita, and brother, Laxman. The villain of the story is Ravana, who kidnaps Sita, after which Rama rescues her and they come back to Ayodhya. The epic that blankets candour duty, righteousness, and countless ideal virtues is, like everything else, contextual and ridden with the evils of society. With the Ramayana breaking records in recent times, it is of utmost importance to contemplate its relevance and impact in the 21st century. Epics have a long oral tradition, thereby they are not monolithic texts. They belong to multiple narratives emerging from various points of subjectivity, community consciousness and disparate experiences of historicity. In a postcolonial framework, epics in India have become significant tropes for establishing new histories and narrating marginality in terms of

class, caste, race, indigeneity and other hegemonic politics of differentiation. An important intervention in the retelling of epics in India has been the feminist appropriation of marginalized, silenced women's voices.

The term "revisioning" refers to the process by which feminist interpretations or retellings of the epic revise and revise the female characters in order to give them voice, agency, and visibility. The different retellings of the Ramayana are influenced by specific contexts. Literary conventions, specific configurations of social relations, the beliefs of individual religious communities, and regional cultures influence different tellings of The Ramayana. The political and social views of the authors—their own time in history, literary inclinations, their place in society, and their religious beliefs—are all expressed in their rewritings of The Ramayana.

The article "Women in Ramayana: Portrayals, Understandings, Interpretations, and Relevance" by Dr. Prema Kasturi highlights the crucial roles played by women in the epics in shaping the Indian tradition and the role of women. Dr. Prema Kasturi says: "The strong and quiet story spoke straight to the heart of the people ... to this day, no one force that goes so far towards the moulding of Indian womanhood as the ever-living touch of the little hand of that Sita who is held to have been Queen of Ayodhya..."

Swami Nishkreyas Ananda, as recorded by Dr. Prema Kasturi, divides the women in the epic into two main categories: saintly women like Ahalya and women like Sita Mandodari, Tara, and the three queens of Dasharatha, who remain within the confines of family and society. Kasturi quotes Swami Vivekananda, where he declares, "Sita is unique; that character was depicted once and for all." "There could have been several Ramas, but no more than one Sita." (26)

Unlike Dr. Prema Kasturi's understanding of women in the epic, numerous interpretations of female characters have come in from different perspectives. The portrayals of women in the Ramayana bring to light a noteworthy collection of stereotypes found in myths, folklore, and fairy tales from every period and country, many times over. Thus, these myths came to be retold in new ways through the act of revision and rewriting.

The genre short story distinguishes itself from other genres and proves to be powerful because it focuses on individual characters and their lives. The short stories of Sarah Joseph and Volga, based on episodes from the Ramayana, take a deeper look into the marginal female characters from the Ramayana and give them voice to narrate their stories from their perspectives. The article "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" by Adrienne Rich raises many concerns around women, like "how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh" (18). Adrienne Rich claims for a change in the concept of feminine identity: "We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (19).

The rewritings by women authors uphold the concern of Adrienne Rich when she says, "No male writer has written primarily or even largely for women, or with the sense of women's criticism as a consideration when he chooses his materials, his theme, and his language. But to a lesser or greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women" (20).

In the Ramayana, Valmiki, perhaps with a feminist heart, chiselled Sita's character as a harmonious embodiment of beauty, tenderness of heart, abundance of compassion, fidelity, wisdom of the truest type, courage of heart, and endurance that served her well in constantly asserting herself for her rights — rights as defined by her value system. But Indian feminists have often criticised Sita as "an overly-submissive wife who committed suicide for an ultimately untrusting husband" (Hirst and Lynn, 2004). Driven by the understanding of Ramayana and its main characters, Hindus, traditionally, revere Sita as the role model of womanhood. But feminists of today challenge this proposition on two counts: one, they consider her character as an illustration of the subjugation of women in Hindu culture, and two, they feel that upholding Sita as a role model is tantamount to endorsing male supremacy and female subservience. Indeed, some feminists have argued that "Sita syndrome" breeds domestic violence in India. But a dispassionate examination of Sita's conduct all through the epic does not give the reader the impression that she has ever sacrificed any of her values and rights as an individual. Nor could a reader see Sita anywhere in the epic subjugating herself to male dominance — be it of husband, Rama or that of even Ravana, the murderous ruler of demons of Lanka, in whose custody she remained as a captive all alone for a year but challenging his power all through such is her consciousness of her right and the bravery with which she arduously upheld her esteem.

The Ramayana unfolds across a robust landscape led by multiple female characters, beyond its heroine Sita. The epic imagines a society where choice—social, marital, political, and spiritual—was as much an area of concern for a desiring woman as it was for the man, irrespective of whether she lived in a hermit's adobe or a palace. Kaikeyi, Sita, Tara, and Mandodari stand alongside their powerful husbands, never blind followers, heeding the counsel of their mind always—wrong or right. It is Rama who conducts the Ashvamedha Yagna in the shadow of his abandoned wife's golden statue to lend the sacrifice sanctity and spectacle. Kaikeyi, a warrior queen, is the charioteer of her husband, King Dasharatha, and steers him to safety in a ferocious battle between the Devas and Asuras. The act gets her the two boons that trigger the events leading to the epic's first dramatic event — Rama's exile.

The story's second major turning point is Rama's confrontation with Ravana, which is triggered by another warrior princess, Surpanakha's desire for a "married" Rama. The third major catalyst event leading to the eventual finding of Sita and the climatic Rama-Ravana battle was possible because the queen of Kishkindha, Tara, had advised her husband Bali to only banish and not kill Sugriva in their duels for the monkey kingdom. Before dying, Bali insists upon Sugriva consulting Tara on all decisions of statecraft, as "her advice never goes without effect." Like a hero's wife, Tara mourns Bali's death and refuses the Kishkindha throne when offered to succeed her dead husband. She opts for Sugriva's kingship, with her son, Angad, as the heir apparent. Her tact comes to the fore again when Sugriva sends her to pacify a raging Lakshmana, upset over the latter's forgetting his promise to start searching for Sita.

Mandodari too, never shies away from giving sane counsel to the ferocious Ravana, constantly urging him to return Sita with honour. But when the war comes upon their Lankan capital, she does not abandon her husband, as his blood brother Vibhisana did.

Ramayana's women — whether driven by love, lust or high-purpose — never shy away from articulating choice and are rarely restrained by their male counterparts. Rama indulges Sita's "silly" wish for the golden deer while knowing that it was a trap. Of the three males who try coveting women against their will, Ravana and Bali get killed, and Indra is cursed. Though the Ramayana effects categorical punishments against any violation of women, none of the women from queen Kaikeyi to ascetic

Anasuya show any need for male protection or incapability for self-defence. Sita is acknowledged in Valmiki's Ramayana for her ability to "reduce Ravana to ashes through the fire of her chastity" alone.

Beyond the epic's politico royal landscape, its spiritual scape of forests and ashramas too features strong willed women in the 'ascetic- like' Anasuya, shabari and Swayamprabha. The latter two lead single, independent, and fulfilling lives by choice.

Unlike their counterparts from subsequent epico-literary creations from the Indian subcontinent or other cultures, Ramayana's women while covering the entire spectrum of female needs, roles, aspirations and identities get rarely judged if their wants are not unfair or in conflict with the fundamental rights of another. Most importantly, they are skilled in areas that later came to be seen as male-exclusive, such as physical combat and austerity.

Each of the epic's female characters had the option of exercising and enjoying the essentials of the feminism movement—equality of rights and opportunities. This "right to equality and opportunity," which is naturally accorded to men and women in the epic, is perhaps the essence edge that made their "age" a Satya or Truth Yuga.

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